DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 470 CS 201 996

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TITLE Is the Elective Program Another Case of Professional Doublespeak?
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on English Education (13th, Colorado Springs, Colorado, March 20-22, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Behavioral Objectives; *Curriculum Development; *Educational Philosophy; Effective Teaching; *Elective Subjects; *English Curriculum; Higher Education; Student Ability; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Public Doublespeak

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that teachers of English may be reverting to a kind of doublespeak in elective English programs which reflects an unsteady knowledge of how to evaluate all English programs. The terms "elective" and "teacher specialization" are examined as they relate to the classroom experience. Labeling a course as an elective does not guarantee any changes in teaching which take into account the intellectual levels or the economic and cultural backgrounds of the students. It is suggested that immediate student feedback on attainment of objectives would aid teachers in improving instruction and in building better rationales for all courses, including elective courses. (TS)

ED105470

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Is the Elective Program Another Case of Professional Doublespeak?

by

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Sydney Harris, the newspaper columnist, has deplored for years what we now call Doublespeak; and although he has satirized all forms of Doublespeak, he has been particularly offended by the type which deliberately covers up a speaker's real meaning; for example, he quotes contemptuously a high school principal in Connecticut who resigned after appropriating public funds for his own use. The letter of resignation said: "I have exerted poor judgment resulting in errors in the area of financial procedures." Harris wonders why the principal didn't say, "I was wrong." Harris might satirize such Doublespeak by quoting the woman who wrote about a relative who was electrocuted in New York's Sing Sing Prison as the person "who occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of America's best known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and literally died in the harness."

Edwin Newman in his new book Strictly Speaking quotes James St. Clair, Nixon's attorney as saying that an extension of a subpoena was necessary in order to "evaluate and make a judgment in terms of a response."[1] Of course, what he meant was that more time was needed to think about the matter. Why he didn't say that, says Newman, is a commentary on the state of the language and the state of the language is a commentary on the state of society.

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[1]Edwin W. Newman, Strictly Speaking (Indianapolis/New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1974), p. 1.

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When it comes to elective programs in English, it may be that teachers of English are, intentionally or not, reverting to a kind of Doublespeak which reflects an unsteady knowledge of how to evaluate all programs in English and also reflects a desire to believe that putting old wine in new bottles somehow changes the wine. Perhaps the Doublespeak mirroring the state of elective programs in English is not so shocking to English teachers as Watergate Doublespeak is to them because Doublespeak used in regard to electives has been used so regularly in the teaching of English that teachers have become numb to the use of camouflaged language in their own backyards.

In examining the language of English teaching, let us consider first the word "elective" itself. Is it a form of Doublespeak? Do students truly choose their own courses? Many elective programs reported in the literature put great stress on the "judicious guidance" of counselors and English instructors. How does "judicious guidance" differ from "pressure" or just plain "direct instructions" to take such and such a course.

George Hillock's Alternatives in English and other studies of elective programs have told us a great deal about the state of the art. They tell us, for one thing, that supporters claim that these kinds of courses meet the interests, needs, and abilities of the students. This seems to be a classic example of Doublespeak inasmuch as Hillocks found that elective courses appear to reflect teacher interests rather than student interests. Very few programs show evidence of any systematic analysis of student needs.

Can we believe the statement that elective courses are appropriate to students' abilities? There is some evidence to indicate that phase-elective programs attempt to steer students into appropriate courses

by labeling the phases as the Trenton Michigan Handbook does:

> Phase 1 courses are designed for students who find reading, writing, speaking, and thinking quite difficult and have serious problems with basic skills.
>
> Phase 2 courses are created for students who do not have serious difficulty with basic skills but need to improve and refine them and can do so best by learning at a somewhat slower pace.
>
> Phase 3 courses are particularly for those who have an average command of the basic language skills and would like to advance beyond these basic skills but do so at a moderate rather than an accelerated pace.
>
> Phase 4 courses are for students who learn fairly rapidly and have good command of the basic language skills.
>
> Phase 5 courses offer a challenge to students who have excellent control of basic skills and who are looking for stimulating academic learning experiences.[2]

How is this different from tracking or streaming except in the fact that the student is allowed to choose his own poison? There is some ~~Studies of Wolfe and associates at Kent State~~ evidence to indicate that English teachers in traditional programs who have two courses at one grade level - one course composed of students who find English easy and one course composed of slower students - teach both ability classes the same way; and there are no data to indicate that teachers in elective programs are any different.

If teacher interest does, in reality, determine which electives are offered, what does the word "choice" mean? Does it mean electing a course because friends do? Is a choice among undesirables no choice at all? Such options remind ~~me~~ one of the elementary student who was disruptive and restless in class and was given by his teacher the choice of sitting at his desk and writing a story or sitting at his desk and working math problems. When the teacher asked what he had elected to do, his answer

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[2]As quoted in George Hillocks, Jr., Alternatives in English: A Critical Appraisal of Elective Programs (Urbana: ERIC-NCTE, 1972), p. 15.

was, "I'll just sit here and say, 'Damn.'" No doubt, many of our students studying the catalog of electives are sitting there and saying, "Damn."

Does "teacher specialization" which is praised as a feature of elective courses really mean "teacher narrowness," "teacher performance," or "compartmentalization of subject matter?" Does "teacher specialization" mean that all students are expected to get their so-called basic skills in pre-elective courses so that teachers in elective courses may assume that all students possess these skills? If so, the language of electives reflects an abysmal ignorance of educational psychology and a tendency toward nostalgia for the teaching methods and tenets of the 1920's and 30's. We have a good deal of empirical evidence demonstrating the relative inefficiency of teaching isolated skills unrelated to the students' lives or the rest of their learning; but the Doublespeak of "teacher specialization" may conceal the lack of integration of all the language arts, including media.

"Specialization" may also be another word for teacher self-indulgence. If a teacher's expertise is Shakespeare, does the elective program provide an opportunity for him or her to indulge in analyzing the works of the Bard to the relative exclusion of speaking, reading, writing, and listening activities?

A chronologically-organized, traditionally taught elective course in Shakespeare or the Victorian novel is essentially a unit extracted from the British Literature Survey and is no better or no worse than that section of the Survey is. English teachers either have not learned the Piagetian Law of Conservation, or they choose to pay it homage only through their use of language. Nevertheless, it is still true that transferring a quart of liquid from a tall, thin bottle into

a long, squat bottle does not change the quantity or the substance of the liquid. Giving a section of the British Literature Survey a more specific title or ~~noun~~ name does not necessarily change its nature; nor does labeling it "elective" guarantee any changes in teaching which take into account the intellectual levels of the students; the social, economic, and cultural backgrounds of the students; the particular instructional strategy being used; the specific subject matter being taught; and the teacher involved. No real change in the teaching of English can be effected until such basic matters are dealt with.

As a matter of fact, elective courses which, according to the jargon, "meet individual needs" may actually discourage individualization because the teacher believes that since the students chose the course, they will be able and willing to complete any tasks set by the instructor. The students then become a captive audience to whatever methodology or approach the teacher prefers because if the students' needs are not being met, they have no recourse since they elected to take the offering. Such abdication of teacher responsibility cannot be disguised by clever use of Doublespeak any longer.

Now do not mistake my intent - I am not writing off elective courses in any way, shape, or form. I am merely saying that English teachers believe what they want to believe and this is reflected in the language they use, and/or the language which they use influences their beliefs. The Doublespeak they deplore in others, they employ and perpetuate professionally - not only in relation to elective programs but in many of their efforts. It may be that they will continue to be unwary users of Doublespeak until they are willing to specify the kind of abilities and behaviors they are trying to teach - until programs are measured by what students actually learn. At the present time most

decisions to implement curricular changes seem to be based not on data about what students learn but on political factors.

Hillocks cites evidence to show that affective student response to elective courses is positive, but the little evidence we have does not indicate any cognitive superiority of elective courses. After the novelty - a kind of Hawthorne effect - of elective courses has worn off, students may judge them on qualities intrinsic to the courses rather than on the right to choose. Interestingly, the fact that attainment of goals is not demonstrably better in either elective or traditional courses may indicate that teachers in both situations are teaching in much the same manner. True differentiation in courses will be the result of objectives more specifically stated and the result of measurement that is more refined.

W. James Popham of UCLA enthusiastically supports measuring teacher effectiveness by how well students learn the material taught. Given specific subject matter to teach, an instructor is judged on how well his or her students learn what the objectives of the lesson specify.

If we find that on a test, most teachers produce students who answer correctly 50% of the items, then when a teacher with comparable students produces correct results of 75%, we can assume that the second teacher is superior and look at the variables involved. We have, claims Popham, paid too much attention to what happens in teaching and not enough attention to the results of teaching.

We have been concerned with team teaching, how often a teacher smiles, elective courses, etc., and have neglected the products of teaching - the data about what the students have learned as measured by tests based on stated performance objectives. Such evaluation

would ascertain how well students learned what the teacher professed to teach, not how well they were sorted into groups by a standard achievement measure. Immediate feedback on attainment of objectives would aid teachers in improving instruction and in building better rationales for all courses, including elective courses.

Granted that elective courses have broken locksteps in English and have improved some students' attitudes, even so, such gains as student planning, student-involvement, use of media, cross-level enrollment, and student choice are not inherently a part of nor exclusively limited to elective courses. The guts of an elective course, like a ~~taught-team~~ team-taught course, or like any other type of administrative arrangement, is not changed by the label of the administrative plan. The label may be a form of Doublespeak which hides a multitude of sins. True advances in the teaching of English will come through hard-headed analysis of the teaching act and of its effects. Such disciplined action will, in turn, be reflected in the use of more precise language and will free the English teacher from the charge of engaging in Doublespeak.

One final word, The Second Handbook of the Research on Teaching presents data to support the belief that one of the strongest influences on teachers is the way they were taught. If English Educators wish to support elective programs as well as proper evaluation of their effectiveness, then perhaps they ought to be teaching ~~the course in~~ The Methods of Teaching English Course by some kind of elective, module system using performance-based criteria for evaluation. The Personalized Teacher Education Program at the Texas R & D Center might serve as a model.

Doublespeak, resulting from observing and evaluating in a highly subjective manner, threatens the English profession just as it threatens other areas; and well might we ask, "For what is an English teacher profited, if he shall gain the whole elective program, or team teaching - or whatever, - if the profession lose its soul - its reason for existence?"